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ABSTRACT

Before cutting up words, analyzing and dissecting them, children should touch the reality behind them. The arts are fundamental to the language experience approach to reading, providing a perceptual framework for a child to express ideas and feelings. The results of selected school programs where the arts have been incorporated into the curriculum are that the arts humanized curriculum and school environment, increased self-concept, reduced vandalism, and increased reading scores. Visual and aural experience allows children to discover and perceive new aspects of their environment, formulate concepts about them, and express them in nonverbal terms. Architecture and the visual arts, music, drama, and dance each have their own contributions to make to the world of the child. Although a case can be made for the arts to be part of the basic education for every child, budgets for funding arts education are low and will be until voters clearly understand that the arts are essential to reading and language development. (TJ)

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The Arts and Reading "Coming to Our Senses"

Why the Visual & Performing Arts are Fundamental to Reading & Language Development

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"Education should be integral. It should encourage the growth of the whole and complete individual. It follows that education is not entirely, nor even mainly, an affair of book learning, for that is only the education of one part of our nature--the part of the mind that deals with concepts and abstractions. In the child, who is not yet mature enough to think by these short cut methods, it should be largely an education of the senses--the sense of sight, touch, hearing: in one word the education of the sensibility." Herbert Read, Education Through Art, 1958.

"When you get into a school that is dedicated to the arts, it is all around you. You know when a school is alive, you see it in the kids, you see it in the way the parents come in. You see it in the office, there is a kind of light to the whole thing, that cannot be translated other than by personal observation." Principal, "Arts in General Education," New York Schools.

I have never taught anyone to read words, rather, lines, colors, forms, textures, harmonies, rhythms, and movements. My work has been primarily in the silences between the words, the negative space, or as the children call it the space around. I believe that perception occurs in the silence between the words while the child is drawing the picture together in his mind. Words are merely bridges to a reality that is singularly unique for each child.

If, however, reading is as the continuing theme of this conference states, "THE PROCESS OF CREATING MEANING FOR SENSED STIMULI," if the reading process requires RECRUITING THE SENSES OF THE WHOLE CHILD as the writings

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of Malcolm Douglass, Peter Spencer, and Roach Van Allen tell us, then I have been engaged in this process. Rather, I should say, the process of developing environments where reading takes place, because I believe reading is not taught. The child initiates this process himself from deep down inside; you only facilitate it.

In preparation for the 1979 conference, I cut up a mustard flower, putting each part in a separate envelope marked petal, stamen, pistil, sepal. These parts are dry and lifeless now. The form, the color, the smell are gone. The essence of the mustard flower is gone. None of you would hand these pieces to a child and expect him to reconstruct the reality of this flower, and yet we so often fragment reality for children rather than giving it to them as a tool for learning.

Before cutting up the words, analyzing and dissecting them, the child should touch the reality behind them. A reading program should enable a child to draw from the vocabulary of the senses that he has already developed. So as Malcolm Douglass says, "The child's ability to represent his experience parallels his beginning to understand the signs and symbols society has developed for representing experience."[1.] Most children have experienced flowers long before they encounter the word symbol FLOWER. One symbol for a vast number of distinctly individual flowers. Descriptive adjectives make flowers yellow, red, curved, smooth. The child, who has lived in an environment where there are flowers, knows hundreds of these adjectives long before he is able to read them. This direct personal experience, "the primary reading process," as Peter Spencer referred to it, "is the basic source for the formation of ideas and fundamental to a reading program."[2.]

WHY THE ARTS ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO READING

The arts provide a perceptual framework for the child to express ideas, feelings, and with in which to reconstruct the primary experience gathered from his environment. Through the manipulation and reconstruction of experience, the child develops the powers of discrimination, selectivity, expression, and the ability to give divergent responses. According to Roach Van Allen, "One hundred percent of reported reading failure is in the area of children's inability to give divergent type responses."[3.]

Rather than a pre-constructed linear experience where the child is a passive spectator, visual and performing arts programs provide the child with the opportunity to actively engage himself in the elements of line, form, harmony, rhythm, pattern, and texture to reconstruct these elements in his own terms, to develop his own concepts, his own reality.

RESULTS OF SELECTED SCHOOL PROGRAMS WHERE THE ARTS HAVE BEEN INCORPORATED INTO THE CURRICULUM

For the past year, I have been reviewing twenty-one school programs, that took place in the United States, from the late sixties through last summer, where the arts had been incorporated into the curriculum.[4.] I began with Frances Hine's "Pilot Study of Visual Art Curriculum and Instruction and Related Methods of Evaluation." Hine's study was done in cooperation with the Docent Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and four Los Angeles County Unified School Districts, from 1968 to 1972. It formed a foundation for many of the programs that followed.

These programs were based in large urban areas, inner city and suburban schools and in small rural communities. Despite their diversity, their "overall goal was to improve the quality of education for all children, by incorporating all the arts in the teaching and learning process, in the belief that the arts can be useful tools for better teaching and learning in all subjects, as well as, important fields of study in their own right."[5.] From them, these results were reported: the arts humanized curriculum and school environment, increased self concept, reduced vandalism, and increased reading scores.

INCORPORATING THE ARTS INTO THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

The visual and aural experience should be initiated in the child's immediate surroundings. At first, the child needs not so much to become aware of the "arts" in museums and concert halls, but of the world of which these arts speak. Learning through the arts then becomes a transactional approach to the world, whereby, the child may discover and perceive new aspects of his environment, formulate concepts about them, and express them in non-verbal terms. "Prosaic writing limits itself to using, through accepted signs, the meanings already accepted in a given culture. Great prose and poetry is the art of capturing a meaning which until then had never been

objectified and of rendering it accessible to everyone who speaks the same language."[6] The visual and performing arts objectify meaning and make it accessible to everyone. If all meaning could be expressed in words and numbers, art and music would not exist.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE VISUAL ARTS

In my years at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I never ceased to be amazed at the power of the object to communicate a time, a place, an idea, a value. The visual arts are a mirrored reflection, a semblance, a shining back of the societal patterns, generated by the cultures that produced them. They are a short hand to history, one of the most valuable tools to develop man's understanding of man. Art forms considered basic to the quality of life were studied: architecture, city planning, industrial and environmental design. The city was considered as a piece of sculpture that molds and shapes millions of lives. Students developed concepts of how to use the amount of fixed space for human purposes and applied their ideas to their classrooms, schools, and immediate environment.

MUSIC

The involvement of the child in musical activities not only provided joy, but a basis of understanding that people communicate their feelings through music and that cultures are reflected in music, as well as, other forms.

The child's imagination was stirred through the words, rhythm, pitch of a song, the singing and clapping part of a story or poem. Through the total musical process of translating symbols into meaningful sounds, performing, composing, conducting, listening with critical awareness, the child was involved in intricate cognitive processes, as well as, developing the auditory perception and attention span considered necessary to success in reading.

DRAMA

Drama began by involving children in various kinds of dramatic play, story telling, and puppetry. Drama was a way of communicating feeling through gestures, actions, and facial expressions. Through improvisational theater techniques, children gained the ability to rearrange, analyse, and redefine experience. Pictures in a child's mind became characterizations, dialogues, creative drama, original language expression.

DANCE

Dance was considered in a broader sense and included exploring other cultures. Performance activities and experiences developed a visual and kinesthetic sense of aesthetic movement, organization, form, symmetry, contrast, and repetition.

THE ENIGMA OF THE CONCERN VS. THE REALITIES OF FUNDING ARTS PROGRAMS IN THE SCHOOLS

We can make a case for the arts to be a part of the basic education of every child. The research done in the last ten years has shown us this. The cries to get on with it have come from every side, not least of all, including Ernest L. Boyer, U.S. Commissioner of Education. "First, we must promote the arts because they are inherently of great value. It has been said that humans are distinguishable from animals because of languages, our mastery of complex symbols. The arts are essential to language development."[7.]

The Council for Basic Education in 1975 issued the following statement, "The Council has formally included the arts in its restatement of objectives. We believe the arts are a part and a considerably fundamental part of basic education."[8.] Malcolm Douglass in his article, "Reading the Great American Fetish," states that, "Reading instruction in the United States has followed a consistent course for many years, despite much evidence suggesting such instruction may be extraordinarily inefficient, if not misdirected." He argues, "that the teaching of reading is a much more subtle affair than we have previously imagined and that its emergence depends upon a kind of nurturing, which never has existed in our schools to any degree. And that the remarkable ability to represent experience that the child has before he enters school should be nurtured by embellishing and enriching that environment, so that, the widest range of opportunities to further this will be present. The art curriculum obviously has a significant role to play at every age level."[9.] If men, such as Malcolm Douglass, and women, who have spent their lives studying children and the reading process, tell us that the arts are essential to reading and language development, why hasn't the log jam of apathy been broken? The answer to this question is until this information is made clear to voters and the budget makes the priorities for funding arts education will remain low. The contrast between what the schools are spending on reading and arts education, is a poignant reminder of this fact.

Recently, an elementary principal of a K-6 school with 700 pupils, told me her budget for reading was forty thousand dollars and for art four hundred. This disparity was not of her choosing; she is part of a system that has established these priorities. She would like to change the ratio, not increase the budget. Will she be successful? Perhaps, she is now working on alternative sources of funding with programs for her school through parents, clubs, and other community resources. She is making it happen the best she can, in spite of budget restrictions. She is not alone. Throughout the ten school districts I work with, this kind of commitment is being made by individual principals.

In 1977, a report was published as a result of a national three year study of arts in education by a panel of distinguished Americans, headed by David Rockefeller Jr. Since its publication, Coming to Our Senses the Significance of the Arts for American Education has been stirring a quiet revolution across the country in grass roots America. The report is not a blueprint for action, but a call to action. I would like to close this paper with a statement from it:

> "Our environment is what we make it. How we shape it, depends upon how we perceive it. Through the arts, we can learn to see our environment more clearly; to sense its color, song, and dance; and to preserve its life and quality. Many of our schools and most of our cities and towns, however, bear testimony to our general "senselessness." All schools should be galleries or supermarkets of wonderful information, but to many have become fearful, gray, fortresses."[10.]

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